

**TRANSCRIPT OF INTERVIEW  
OF  
NICHOLAS ZARSKI, JR.**

**13 PAGES  
(INCLUDING COVER)**

## NATIONAL TRANSPORTATION SAFETY BOARD

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In the Matter of: \*  
\*  
FIRE ON BOARD THE \*  
U.S. PASSENGER VESSEL \*  
PORT IMPERIAL MANHATTAN \*  
NOVEMBER 17, 2000 \*  
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Monday,  
November 20, 2000

INTERVIEW OF:

NICHOLAS ZARSKI, JR.

This interview was conducted by Donald J. Tyrrell,  
Investigator-in-Charge, National Transportation Safety Board,  
Office of Marine Safety, 490 L'Enfant Plaza East, Washington,  
D.C. 20594.

## 1 P R O C E E D I N G S

2 MR. TYRRELL: Today is November 20th. Could  
3 you give me your full name?

4 CAPTAIN ZARSKI: Nicholas Zarski, Jr.

5 MR. TYRRELL: Nicholas.

6 CAPTAIN ZARSKI: Z-A-R-S-K-I.

7 MR. TYRRELL: S-K-I?

8 CAPTAIN ZARSKI: Right. Jr.

9 MR. TYRRELL: Jr. Okay.

10 And what is your current occupation?

11 CAPTAIN ZARSKI: Captain --

12 MR. TYRRELL: Captain what?

13 CAPTAIN ZARSKI: at New York Waterway

14 (inaudible)

15 MR. TYRRELL: Okay. And on the night of  
16 November 17th, were you on duty?

17 CAPTAIN ZARSKI: Yes.

18 MR. TYRRELL: Okay. And were you the captain  
19 of the George Washington at that time?

20 CAPTAIN ZARSKI: Yes.

21 MR. TYRRELL: Okay. How long have you worked  
22 for this company?

23 CAPTAIN ZARSKI: It will be a year in January.  
24 Ten months.

25 MR. TYRRELL: Okay. What did you do before

1       that?

2                   CAPTAIN ZARSKI: Worked at Miller's Launch  
3       in Staten Island

4                   MR. TYRRELL: And how long did you work for  
5       them?

6                   CAPTAIN ZARSKI: A year.

7                   MR. TYRRELL: One year?

8                   CAPTAIN ZARSKI: Yes.

9                   MR. TYRRELL: And was that as a vessel master  
10      there?

11                  CAPTAIN ZARSKI: Yes.

12                  MR. TYRRELL: What kind of vessel did you  
13      operate?

14                  CAPTAIN ZARSKI: Crew boats, oil spill  
15      response boats, a little tugboat pushing barges.

16                  MR. TYRRELL: Okay.

17                  CAPTAIN ZARSKI: And little jet boats.

18                  MR. TYRRELL: Do you have a Coast Guard  
19      license

20                  CAPTAIN ZARSKI: Yes.

21                  MR. TYRRELL: Which license do you have?

22                  CAPTAIN ZARSKI: 100 Ton master near coastal.

23                  MR. TYRRELL: Okay.   How long have you had  
24      the license?

25                  CAPTAIN ZARSKI: Since October '98.

1 MR. TYRRELL: Okay. Okay. Could you just  
2 go through what happened on the night of the fire when  
3 you, where you were when you first saw there was  
4 something amiss, and what you did and, you know, right  
5 up to the time where you delivered the people ashore?

6 CAPTAIN ZARSKI: I was on the Hoboken line. I  
7 didn't see it happen. I was too far south. And Allen,  
8 the manager on duty at the time, went over the radio  
9 saying the Manhattan is in trouble. Nick break off  
10 your runs and get them. I had one lady onboard I  
11 dropped off at the World Financial Barge and I shot up  
12 north. And I seen the smoke as soon as I turned the  
13 boat around to go up north, after I got up ways. And  
14 I seen the smoke. I didn't see any flames right away.  
15 And then I guess the wind blew or something and I seen  
16 the orange flames and I got my crew, I got a hand held  
17 extinguishers, just in case, and I was going up north  
18 and Allan said, Manhattan on fire, you get the people  
19 off now and bring to the Jamestown.

20 So, I got up about 100 yards away from the  
21 boat and the fire boat, I forgot the name of the fire  
22 boat, was coming to the bow of the Manhattan, too, at  
23 the same time I was. So I had to call him on 13, and I  
24 couldn't reach him. So, I used my loud heller, the PA  
25 system, I got the attention of the crew and they told

1 me to back off. That they were coming in. So, I  
2 proceeded to back off and then as I put the engines in  
3 reverse, they called me, come back in, go get them.  
4 And I pulled up to the bow and the passengers got off  
5 first and then the deck hands and then Duke was the  
6 last one off. They all had life jackets on. There was  
7 a life raft in the water and the man overboard ladder  
8 in the bow. They took the man overboard ladder as I  
9 was approaching the bow.

10 And the passengers got on, I sent my deck  
11 hands around with a paper and pen getting their names  
12 and phone numbers and keep telling them to, ask them  
13 about medical assistance, telling them there was going  
14 to be an ambulance waiting. And my deck hands came up  
15 a couple minutes later, said, okay, we have got  
16 everybody's name and number, nobody is hurt. Everybody  
17 just wants to go home. So, I dropped them off at the  
18 Jamestown.

19 MR. TYRRELL: Dropped them off where?

20 CAPTAIN ZARSKI: At the downtown slip, at the  
21 Jamestown in Weehawken. The main terminal.

22 MR. TYRRELL: Okay. How far away were you  
23 when you first turned around and saw the smoke?

24 CAPTAIN ZARSKI: When I first turned around  
25 and saw the smoke?

1 MR. TYRRELL: Yes.

2 CAPTAIN ZARSKI: How far away was I away from  
3 the boat?

4 MR. TYRRELL: Yeah, how far away, how far did  
5 you have go to come to their assistance?

6 CAPTAIN ZARSKI: How many miles from World  
7 Financial to Chelsea? I would say about a mile. Mile  
8 and a half.

9 MR. TYRRELL: When you saw it, you said as you  
10 approached you saw orange flames?

11 CAPTAIN ZARSKI: Well, at first I just seen  
12 smoke over the piers with the lights, and I was coming  
13 up and then I started seeing some flickering orange.

14 MR. TYRRELL: Where did you see the, what part  
15 of the vessel did you see the flames?

16 CAPTAIN ZARSKI: At that point I, I didn't  
17 even see the vessel. I just seen the flames and the  
18 smoke. I didn't know what was up, what was down on the  
19 boat. And all I know is when I got up there, the way  
20 the Manhattan was, the bow was to the south and I just  
21 bowed right up. And so, and then I couldn't see inside  
22 the cabin. It was just smoke. That was it.

23 MR. TYRRELL: What color was the smoke?

24 CAPTAIN ZARSKI: Dark grey.

25 MR. TYRRELL: Give me some idea, what is the

1 size of the George Washington?

2 CAPTAIN ZARSKI: Ninety foot.

3 MR. TYRRELL: Ninety foot. It is about  
4 similar to the Manhattan and the New Jersey?

5 CAPTAIN ZARSKI: Yes. Well, it looks similar  
6 but there is a lot of differences, like the size is  
7 pretty much the same. It is just the Manhattan had  
8 benches instead of rows of seats with the life jackets,  
9 going under the rows of seats on the other boats. And  
10 there are two bathrooms in the back. And two sets of  
11 steps going up to the stern. On the other boats there  
12 is only one step for emergencies only.

13 MR. TYRRELL: I see.

14 Anybody say anything when you, either the  
15 crew or passengers, when you picked them up, anything  
16 worth repeating?

17 CAPTAIN ZARSKI: Well, the passengers, when I  
18 picked the passengers up off the Manhattan they didn't  
19 come upstairs. They were just on my bow, I guess  
20 getting fresh air. And the only people that came  
21 upstairs was Duke and Felipe, you know, to thank me.  
22 And the other deck hand was assisting the people  
23 getting their life jackets off.

24 MR. TYRRELL: Anybody appear to be upset in  
25 anyway?



1                   CAPTAIN ZARSKI: Not that I seen, no. From  
2                   what my deckhand said, all these people just wanted to  
3                   do was go home. Nobody was ranting and raving.  
4                   Everybody was civilized, I mean, there was chaos or  
5                   disorder or anything.

6                   MR. TYRRELL: Okay.

7                   CAPTAIN ZARSKI: I didn't hear any screaming.

8                   MR. TYRRELL: Can you tell me something about  
9                   how you do drills on your vessel and how often and that  
10                  sort of thing?

11                  CAPTAIN ZARSKI: We do the drills once a  
12                  month.

13                  MR. TYRRELL: Once a month.

14                  CAPTAIN ZARSKI: We do a man overboard drill  
15                  and a fire drill.

16                  MR. TYRRELL: You do both drills one after the  
17                  other on the same day?

18                  CAPTAIN ZARSKI: No. No. Sometimes we do it  
19                  like a week and then a week, or within a couple of  
20                  days.

21                  MR. TYRRELL: But, you would do a man  
22                  overboard drill once a month and a fire drill once a  
23                  month?

24                  CAPTAIN ZARSKI: Right.

25                  MR. TYRRELL: But, not necessarily in the same

1 week?

2 CAPTAIN ZARSKI: No.

3 MR. TYRRELL: Okay. How do you conduct your  
4 fire drills, what do you do?

5 CAPTAIN ZARSKI: We hook up the hose and prime  
6 it up and we test, another way the fire drills are good  
7 is to make sure everything works, so, we do as if we  
8 are putting out a fire. So, we will hook up the hose,  
9 run the water, make the water come out of the hose.

10 MR. TYRRELL: Over the side?

11 CAPTAIN ZARSKI: Overboard.

12 MR. TYRRELL: You don't want your boat all  
13 wet.

14 CAPTAIN ZARSKI: No.

15 MR. TYRRELL: Okay. Is it the same  
16 basically, basically the same thing that you would do  
17 during a Coast Guard inspection?

18 CAPTAIN ZARSKI: Yes.

19 MR. TYRRELL: Okay. Did you have any  
20 difficulties other than your initial, don't know what  
21 you want to call it, your initial trouble with the fire  
22 boat, did you have any problems, whatsoever, in doing  
23 what you did?

24 CAPTAIN ZARSKI: No. Once the fire boat told  
25 me to come in, they backed off.

1 MR. TYRRELL: Was the fire boat, what were  
2 they doing, were they throwing any water onto the boat?

3 CAPTAIN ZARSKI: No. No.

4 MR. TYRRELL: They were just standing by?

5 CAPTAIN ZARSKI: They had, I remember seeing  
6 them pulling out of their slip as I was coming up and  
7 they just, I guess they were just putting themselves in  
8 position to get ready to go, but then I guess they  
9 figured nobody was coming, maybe they would try to get  
10 the people off and then they seen me, they backed off.  
11 But, not, they were shooting water.

12 MR. TYRRELL: Do you know, offhand, do you  
13 know how, what happened to the Manhattan after that?

14 CAPTAIN ZARSKI: I know it ended up on the  
15 broken piers over there. And they were waiting for the  
16 Coast Guard --

17 MR. TYRRELL: You didn't stick around, so you  
18 didn't --

19 CAPTAIN ZARSKI: I finished the runs for that  
20 boat, and basically all I heard over the radio was they  
21 are waiting for Coast Guard, nobody touch the boat,  
22 nobody on it, whatever. They got the fire out quickly.  
23 And the boat was just sitting there waiting.

24 MR. TYRRELL: Do you know who towed it over?

25 CAPTAIN ZARSKI: No. No, I don't know exactly.

1 MR. TYRRELL: Do you have questions?

2 CAPTAIN ZARSKI: I left, I punched out about  
3 10:15, and it was still sitting there. So, I went  
4 home.

5 MR. SILECCHIA: Eleven thirty we brought it  
6 over, 11:30, quarter to 12.

7 MR. TYRRELL: You brought it back over here?

8 MR. SILECCHIA: Yes, we towed it over.

9 MR. TYRRELL: What was traffic in the river  
10 like, other traffic when the, when you went to the, to  
11 the assistance of the Manhattan, what other traffic was  
12 operating in the area at the time?

13 CAPTAIN ZARSKI: I know when I got up the  
14 Celestial was a couple of yards off, maybe 100, 150  
15 yards off. And there was a southbound tug pushing a  
16 barge. That was the only traffic I noticed.

17 MR. TYRRELL: That is all the questions I  
18 think I can think of right now. I appreciate you  
19 coming in and talking to me.

20 CAPTAIN ZARSKI: No problem.

21 UNIDENTIFIED SPEAKER: What was the weather  
22 like?

23 CAPTAIN ZARSKI: Cold, a little windy, not too  
24 windy, a little breeze. That was no rain. Visibility  
25 was good.

1 MR. TYRRELL: You say there was no rain?

2 CAPTAIN ZARSKI: No.

3 UNIDENTIFIED SPEAKER: The waves were --

4 CAPTAIN ZARSKI: No, it was fairly calm.

5 MR. TYRRELL: You didn't have to put any lines  
6 out, you just held it with the engine?

7 CAPTAIN ZARSKI: No, I just, yeah, I just  
8 bowed up to the boat, the people, everybody got on so  
9 quick. It was only eight passengers, three crew, so it  
10 took them maybe 20 seconds. Because they were all  
11 right on the bow. They were waiting. I touched the  
12 Manhattan, the people came right on.

13 MR. TYRRELL: Okay. Well, thank you very  
14 much.

15 CAPTAIN ZARSKI: Thank you.

16 (Whereupon, the interview was concluded.)